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"The Peace Corps": Love It or Leave It

Back in the seventies the government must have really been pushing the Peace Corps. Its famous slogan, "The Peace Corps: The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love," was ubiquitous. I couldn't watch television for one hour without seeing that commercial which starred a well-groomed young man trudging knee deep through a muddy trench, mouthing the mantra in a stern voice, while a plethora of happy villagers crowded the background. The guy lived and worked in a place as far from the subdivisions I grew up in that one could get. By the time I turned twelve I decided I wanted to be him.

In 1991, after becoming a Master of Fine Arts, I took on the "toughest job I'd ever love." I quickly found out, however, that my "job," instructing bright-eyed Polish students, was hardly tough. In fact, it was downright fun. But I should have heeded the grammar of the famous slogan. By the end of my Pre-service Training for the Peace Corps, I realized that the pin-up boy in the commercial couldn't have been referring to digging irrigation trenches in suffocating heat as the "toughest job." Instead, he must have been talking about his association with the Peace Corps itself, the institution, and the people who train the volunteers.

In 1990, the summer before my last year of graduate school, I traveled through the former Eastern Bloc. I lounged on Charles' Bridge in Prague and listened to young Czech musicians play Dylan songs, an act that would have landed them in prison seven months earlier. In Cracow, I danced to punk versions of The Kinks' songs in an underground bar that used to be a hangout for student protestors wanted by the secret police, and I spent a week with an ex-nun in Budapest who took great delight in watching endless reruns of the unexpurgated execution of Romanian dictator Ceaucescu on a Russian-made television. This is where stuff was happening. When I began the application process for the Peace Corps in the fall, I requested Eastern Europe. Who needed the bugs and poisonous snakes of Africa? Starting in 1990, the Peace Corps sent volunteers to Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland in droves. The woman who conducted my initial interview told me the Peace Corps had more openings than applicants for that region.

"You're a shoe-in," she said. "You've got a Bachelor's and soon a Master's. I envy you. The Peace Corps in Europe! But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Your application looks great, but there is the matter of these

questions..."

Even though the Peace Corps was already in Europe, the questions seemed to come from a standard list made up thirty years earlier:

"What would you do if a village chief sacrificed a goat in your honor?" she asked.

"A village chief?" I asked. "A goat?"

"A goat. Bear in mind that this would be a great honor."

"I'd eat it and thank him graciously?" I replied.

"Good! Now, describe a past experience that would prepare you for living in a mud hut with no running water or electricity."

"A mud hut?"

"In extreme, and believe you me, in extreme heat."

Well, I thought. I live in Kansas. It can get hot. And I've done my fair share of camping. But that was in places like Alaska and Colorado. Luckily I remembered the brochures that describe the type of people the Peace Corps looks for.

"I stayed in some pretty rustic hostels in Prague and Cracow," I said. "But to tell you the truth, I have no experience living in mud huts. But one aspect of being a Peace Corps Volunteer is that you are asked to live at the same 'level' as the people you are serving. This is the best way to understand a different culture. And I want to understand a culture other than my own. If I had that much experience to prepare me for the Peace Corps, I wouldn't want to do it."

"Good!"

The interview lasted about a half hour. At the end, the interviewer said she was recommending me for the Peace Corps. In a couple weeks I would receive some paperwork. After being cleared by the FBI, I would be sent a confirmation letter, which would have the name and extension number of my Placement Officer.

"I've indicated on my form here that you should be placed as a university teacher in Eastern Europe," she said. "My guess is that you will be sent to Hungary. You have everything they're looking for. Send me a Hungarian postcard. All my people send them to me from their posts, so you better as well!"

Hungary! I was thrilled. I couldn't wait to tell my mother and my grandparents, who were full-blooded Hungarians. I'd have to ask them about goat sacrifices and mud huts. Five months earlier, I had ridden an express train from Budapest to Eger, home of Bull's Blood wine. Maybe there were mud huts on the Magyar Plain, but the train was going too fast for me to see them?

I received my confirmation letter in late February. I followed the instructions by calling my Placement Officer in Washington DC immediately. She wasn't there. I was told to call back. I did so, but she still wasn't there. In fact, she wasn't there the first five times I called. During each call I was

promised that she would get back to me. She never did. Two weeks after receiving the paperwork, I caught her at her desk.

"What," she answered.

"Ah, Ms. _____," I said. "This is Mark Lewandowski. I believe you're my Placement Officer?"

"And?" she replied.

"I received this letter two weeks ago and it says that I was to call you immediately."

"And?"

"Well, it says I have been confirmed as a Peace Corps Trainee."

"You need a clearance from the FBI. I'll call you..."

"I've done that already."

"Just a second," she said, with exasperation.

I was put on hold. After staying on the line for five minutes, the recording telling me all about the wonders of the Peace Corps clicked off and was replaced by a dial tone.

I called back.

"What."

"Ms. _____? This is Mark Lewandowski? We were cut off."

"I said I'd call you tomorrow!" she shouted, hanging up before I could get another word in.

She didn't call when promised. The following day, I contacted the woman who interviewed me back in December.

"I'm having problems with my Placement Officer," I said. "Her name is Ms. _____. Do you know her?"

I was met with a moment of silence.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said finally. "You'll have to pamper her."

"Pamper her?"

"And lean on her."

"Pamper and lean?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Can I get another Placement Officer?"

"It's not so easy," she said. "She's likely to get mad and 'lose' your folder and you wouldn't get placed for years...You haven't forgotten about that post card, have you?"

The game of telephone tag with my Placement Officer went on for weeks. Her nastiness continued unabated. April came around and I started to get nervous. Training for teachers was scheduled to begin in June. I would graduate in another month. I hadn't bothered to conduct a job search. I had my official confirmation and the assurance from my interview.

During the first week of April, I "pampered" my Placement Officer. I asked about the weather in DC, as well as about her own experience as a volunteer. After a few moments of pleasant small talk one call she said:

"Mongolia. We'll send you to Mongolia."

"Mongolia? Is that even an independent country?" I asked, doing my best to hide my disappointment.

"If it isn't now, it will be," she said, the anger creeping back into her voice. "Why else would we send our people there?"

"I was really hoping for Eastern Europe," I said. "My mother's family comes from Hun–"

"Mauritania, then," she said. "Don't tell me that you have something against Mauritania. I'm African-American. So don't you tell me you have something against Africa."

"No," I said quietly. I tried to remember where exactly Mauritania was, or if I had ever even heard of it.

I heard papers shuffling on her end.

"You have no French!" she shouted. "How can you expect to go to Mauritania with no French!"

More shuffling of papers.

"Poland, then," she said. "You're going to Poland as a Teacher-Trainer." Now we were in the right part of the world, but Teacher-Trainers were sent to small colleges, not universities. Instead of teaching creative writing and literature, I'd teach ESL and Methodology.

"But..." I said.

It's the only word I got out.

"I don't give a damn what they told you in that interview!" she screamed. "Do you know how hard I've tried to appease you! Do you think this job is easy! Who the hell do you think you are..."

Her harangue lasted a good minute. I had to hold the phone a foot from my ear. The only thing that kept me from hanging up and forgetting about the Peace Corps completely was fear. I had no other prospects. Come May I'd receive my last check as a Teaching Assistant. My parents had recently moved from Kansas City to Cincinnati. I had no desire to stay in Wichita, or to follow my parents. I had no choice, I thought.

My Placement Officer eventually ran out of steam. When her voice reached a more bearable decibel level, I returned the receiver to my ear. Pamper, I thought.

"The universities in Hungary want MA's," she continued. "You have an MFA. I'd have to fax ahead and wait for an answer. That would take weeks. By that time, Poland will be filled and you'll have to wait till next year."

A fax would take weeks? Pamper.

"I'd love to go to Poland," I said. "My father's family is from Pol–"

"It's settled then. Get your physical and dental check immediately."

Come June, I found myself in Miami with 135 other Trainees for the four-day Pre-Service Orientation. Many of my cohorts were disappointed that we weren't being sent off to Poland with the same fanfare as the first Poland group the summer before. Those Trainees had their orientation in

Washington and met President Bush. Miami was chosen this year, we were told, because of the climate. According to our Orientation Trainers, there was no summer in Poland. Winter lasted eight months and you never saw the sun for one minute of it. The climate would be one of the hardest things to grow accustomed to.

"For two years you will not feel the warm sun on your skin. We've chosen Miami so you will at least have a memory of summer to carry you through the darkness of Poland."

The description of the climate could have come straight out of a Solzhenitsyn novel. After these opening comments, I looked around the hotel's convention room and saw faces of bewilderment. What about my baggage, their eyes read. We are only allowed two bags. Should I send all my summer clothes back to Iowa?

Afterwards, the pay phones were jammed with desperate Trainees trying to convince their parents to airmail down coats and wool socks to their training sights in Poland.

"I know it's only June," they pleaded, "but it's still winter there!" Even those from New England and Minnesota looked nervous. What had they gotten themselves into?

The less gullible searched for Trainers that had actually been to Poland to find out what the weather was really like. Of the dozens of officials there, only one had spent time in Poland. He wasn't a Volunteer, but an employee of the Peace Corps in Poland. He had just returned from Warsaw the day before, and his eyes were red with jet lag. He was scheduled to give us a briefing. Finally, we thought, someone with specifics.

"They might have told you it was cold in Poland," he said. "They didn't tell you the half of it. Poland has one of the most inhospitable climates on earth. And let me tell you something else. You better like cabbage because that's all you're going to get to eat. Even in Warsaw. Cabbage. No meat, no fresh fruit, nothing. Cabbage. Two years of cabbage. Cabbage, cabbage." He shuddered and shook his head, as if reliving his worst waking nightmare.

An hour before this speech, I had told some new friends about feasting on roast duck in Cracow. They now looked at me dubiously.

"Don't listen to this clown," I said. "And the weather isn't that bad either."

"But you didn't actually live there," one Trainee said. "You were just a tourist." She spit out the last word like it was dirty.

After Cabbage Man's speech, Trainees scrambled to stock up on all-purpose vitamins.

During another briefing, we were filled in on the grooming habits of Poles. "They dress very conservatively," we were told. "Poland is a Catholic country. Short skirts and revealing tops will not be tolerated. Your skirts should come to below your knees, at least, and all tops should have sleeves

and high necklines. Polish men are conservative as well. As representatives of the United States government, you are expected to present a culturally sensitive appearance."

Later in the day, all the male Trainees with long hair disappeared. When they came back, their manes were shorn to an inch above their collars.

"I told the goons that I've been wearing my hair long since I was a kid," a Trainee told me. "They said that if I didn't have it cut I would be sent home today."

Between the endless speeches and presentations, the warnings and inoculations, we were encouraged to buy gifts for the families that would host us during our training. Those of us familiar with John le Carré novels suggested blue jeans and cigarettes. But what to buy the kids? We sought out the advice of Cabbage Man.

"Calculators," he said. "These people have nothing. Calculators! That's what they need. Take lots of spare batteries, too. You can't even buy those in the hard currency store. Can you imagine your own life without calculators?"

He seemed to admire calculators as much as he despised cabbage.

Most of us left Miami downcast and pessimistic. We were never given a clear picture of Poland, or of what to expect in our training sights. During Orientation I discovered that the Peace Corps had been desperate to fill the 136 slots for Poland. The woman who would become my girlfriend was accepted into the Peace Corps only two weeks before Orientation began. Even if the fax to Hungary had taken weeks, Poland would have still been available.

My own attitude toward the Peace Corps didn't improve until the flight from JFK to Warsaw. I sat next to a young Polish woman who asked me why I was going to Poland. I told her about the Peace Corps. She had never heard of it. When I said that I was going to live in Poland for two years to teach English, tears started streaming down her cheeks.

"There are 135 other people going, too," I said.

She looked above her seat.

"All these Americans?" she asked. She could barely get out the words.

"Yes."

"That is so beautiful," she said. "You don't know how beautiful."

She cried intermittently during the ten-hour flight. For the first time in months I felt proud about the Peace Corps and its mission.

When we checked into our respective hotels in Warsaw, the sun sat hot and high in the clear sky. A group of us strolled up Nowy Swiat, one of the main arteries of the city. The sidewalks were jammed with makeshift markets selling bananas, mandarin oranges, pineapple, kiwi fruit, strawberries and apricots. Next to the fruit snuggled crates of carrots, potatoes, celery, radishes, peppers and green beans. If you rummaged hard enough through the cornucopia, you could even find a cabbage or two. We stole quick

glances into butcher stores displaying pork roasts, strings of sausages and whole chickens. Windows opening onto the street sold take-away pastry and balls of Italian ice cream piled high in waffle cones.

In Old Town, we maneuvered around pedestrians and the cafés that had spilled out onto the cobblestones. The Poles looked young, healthy and thin. (Over forty percent of the population is under the age of thirty. The percentage is higher in big cities like Warsaw.) We gawked at the Polish women. In style were short skirts that barely covered their ass cheeks. Many of the women went braless and wore skimpy tops. They had no problems navigating the cobblestones in their spike heels as they sauntered past the churches on every corner.

We took in the sights, and over draft beer in a small pub we laughed at Cabbage Man. He had been in Warsaw just a week earlier. What was up with the cabbage harangue? Were we fed misinformation or ignorance? Neither answer gave us confidence in the Peace Corps.

After a sleepless night, the result of jet lag and the stifling heat of my hotel room, I was sent to a suburb of Warsaw with one-third of the training group. The other two groups went to two other suburbs. With our presence, Peace Corps: Poland became the largest Peace Corps program in the world.

Arriving in my town, I began to look forward to meeting my host family. I hoped constant exposure to Polish at home, as well as the classes I took in training, would make me conversant in the language. I'd discover first-hand the culture of the typical Polish family, in the process making new friends. We were told that most of the volunteers ended up spending the holidays with their host families, even if they were given work sites on the other side of Poland. This was one of the few things that sounded wonderful back in Miami. As soon as I got off the bus, however, I found out I was assigned to the home of a nine-teen year-old college student. His parents were living at their summer home an hour and a half away. My host had requested a young woman on his questionnaire. He hid his disappointment well when he met me, a twenty-six-year-old male with a scraggly beard.

My gifts for the host "family," which included Pez candy dispensers, became superfluous. But I was more fortunate than my counterparts who had listened to Cabbage Man. Nearly every kiosk in Warsaw sold affordable calculators. One trainee proudly presented the kids of his host family with calculators, only to discover that each of them had a brand new personal computer.

My host and I shared a two room flat. I slept in the main room; he slept in the kitchen. One month into training he started a job with horrible hours. He was often gone before I woke up, and didn't come back until after I went to sleep. I spent most of my after training hours getting drunk with other Trainees or sitting alone and reading in the flat. When we did have time together, he wanted me to set him up with females in my training group. After training ended, I never saw or spoke to my host ever again.

Most Volunteers will tell you that the three-month Training is the worst part of the Peace Corps experience. In Poland we had classes eight hours a day, five days a week. For most of those hours we sat on hard chairs or at desks made for elementary students. The classrooms were hot and poorly ventilated. Our days were split into three components: Language, Technical Training (teaching) and Cross Cultural Studies.

Our Training's Head Director was a big, friendly, outgoing man who had smiles for everyone. On the surface, he was caring and listened whole-heartedly to any complaint presented to him. But about a third of the way through our training he made a statement to us that, to this day, still astonishes and sickens me.

All forty-two of the Trainees (a couple had already "ET'ed," or Early Terminated), as well as the entire Polish staff were brought to order during lunch one day. As our Director began to speak, the Poles dropped their gazes to the lunch in front of them.

"For a few weeks now I've withstood the complaints you Trainees have voiced about the Peace Corps," he said. "This will end right here, right now. I've instructed the Polish staff to report to me any negative comments they may hear about the Peace Corps, whether these comments are made to them directly, or if they happen to hear them in passing. A bad attitude about the Peace Corps will not be tolerated, and I can assure you that anyone with the wrong attitude will not be sworn in as a Volunteer...."

Wanting to weed out those Volunteers not completely devoted to the Peace Corps might be an understandable, albeit unrealistic notion, but anyone with even a shred of knowledge about Eastern Europe under the Soviet yoke should be outraged by our Director's proclamation. The United States stands as a symbol of Freedom and Democracy the world over, but it's possible that Poles hold more passionate their impressions of America than anyone else. America, to them, is everything that the Soviet Empire wasn't. Many Poles refer to the United States as "God's Country," Home of the Blessed. We, as Americans, are a part of what one Peace Corps friend of mine calls the "Lucky Sperm Club." In America citizens can pursue dreams without the worry of disgruntled, jealous neighbors informing on them, thereby having them shipped off to a Siberian gulag. Behind the Iron Curtain, the Informer was even more dreaded and feared than the police, because anyone, even a close family member, could be one.

But in 1991, just a year and a half after the Soviets withdrew their "influence" from Polish territory, a representative of the United States Government ordered Polish citizens to inform. There is no doubt that some of the Polish employees had been informed on when the Communists were in power, or that they themselves were threatened with jail time if they did not inform on one of their friends or colleagues. One teacher of mine, who quit after our summer training, saw the Peace Corps as the embodiment of everything American: wealth, freedom, and sympathy for those not fortunate

enough to be born in "God's Country." To work for this American institution, created by John F. Kennedy to be a cornerstone of his "Nation Building" program, a relatively non-threatening weapon to fight the Evil Communists, was a badge of honor among Poles. What must have our teachers felt when our government asked them to become the very type of people the Peace Corps was created to fight?

Other threats soon followed. Training personnel and trainees were forbidden to have "intimate relations" with one another. If discovered, the Pole would be fired immediately, the trainee sent back to the States. Driving was a no-no. Defiers would be sent home. Our vacation time was also a bone of contention. Officially, we were given twenty-five days per year vacation time, even though we, as teachers, worked eight months a year. The twenty-five days included weekends, because for some reason, volunteers were "on-call" twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The Peace Corps threatened to take away our passports so we wouldn't be able to leave the country, or to at least check them occasionally for departure stamps. Volunteers who left their site without permission were subject to immediate dismissal. During our Swearing-in ceremony, two towels were stolen from the Ambassador's bathroom. The Country Director assumed the thieves were Volunteers, not the dozens of Polish teachers or staff who also attended the event. He threatened to dock every Volunteer's stipend unless the culprits confessed, or someone else informed on them.

Most of us did not have problems with the rules themselves. If they had been explained rationally, we could have easily lived with them. Unfortunately, they were not explained rationally. We were made to feel like criminals before even thinking about committing a "crime."

Were the threats the natural outgrowth of misinformation? Of ignorance? Of arrogance? A mixture, perhaps. The professionals in the Peace Corps (as opposed to one-time volunteers) are career men and women. Officially, a person is only allowed to spend five years working for the Peace Corps in a professional capacity, unless their talent is somehow unique. Summer Trainers can work indefinitely, year after year. All the officials in Poland had been volunteers in places like Sub-Sahara Africa, where the climate can be inhospitable and the variety of food is very limited. Possibly they all looked back on their years as volunteers with nostalgia. These were the days of life-changing experiences, of soul-shaking epiphanies. To them, the Peace Corps meant suffering through heat, fighting uncooperative bureaucracies, warding off tropical diseases, expulsing feces inundated with worms, drinking undrinkable water and being the only white person for miles of undeveloped savannah or jungle. The Peace Corps wasn't about comfort. It wasn't about skiing in the Tatra Mountains over winter break, sipping French coffee in a Renaissance square surrounded by breathtaking architecture, being mesmerized by the treasure-trove of art packed into the Hermitage, or about having readily available fresh food. The Peace Corps was about pain. If no

pain is involved, a two-year commitment is no longer a sacrifice.
One only needs to flip through the official Peace Corps calendar to discover the appropriate environment for the idealistic volunteer. You will not find pictures of well-dressed businessmen in Budapest, or the stunning central square of Gdansk. You will find poor, but cherubic African children and quaint mud huts. The simplicity of rural life in Africa, South America and Asia is the training ground for the true volunteer. My Trainers and Placement Officer had the real Peace Corps experience, and they were hell-bent to create conflicts that would shape me, even if that meant turning themselves into fools and violating every cross-cultural rule the Peace Corps officially endorses.

Training eventually ended, and like a good little citizen I pledged allegiance to the Peace Corps and was sworn in as a Volunteer on the back porch of the U.S. Ambassador's luxurious villa. Once I got to my college in Biala Podlaska, I did my best to put the threats and the misinformation behind me. I wrote humorous letters back home, telling friends and family that I learned about communism by being in the Peace Corps, not by living in an ex-communist state. I completed my two-year obligation, and the day I left Poland was one of the saddest days of my life. Of the 135 people who started with me, less than a hundred finished their two years. One of those who left early was an acquaintance of mine, a ranting idealist who had worked in refugee camps all over the world. I picture him now, back in Miami before he was ordered to cut his hair. He looks very much like Arthur, a young Polish man, my student in Biala Podlaska, one of my best friends in the world, who, to this day, has hair that reaches the small of his back.